

From now on, the spring work is going to have to be called the summer work. We finished shearing several days ago, but July will be here before we have things back together from that disrupting exercise.

The wool harvest has also ended at the ranch of my neighbor, Goat Whiskers the Younger. He had the dubious honor of hosting a shearing crew in the final states of their Texas season. The sheep peeler's bodies were at the shearing corrals; their minds were in the beer joints of San Angelo. Fortunate indeed was the old ewe who lost less than half a pint of blood from their distracted barber work.

Whiskers gave me a new assignment during this work. I was moved from the cavalry to the jobs that are normally saved for old women and young kids. You know what I mean — chores like watering down the pens or running unimportant errands.

My demotion was caused by an innocuous remark. One morning while helping us over at our own outfit, Young Whiskers, a big man, showed up on a bay horse that would barely fit in a span of Shetlands. Four heads the same size would have filled a big cracker box. He made the average ranch pony look like one of those Clydesdales that pull the beer wagons at rodeos.

Without thinking how sensitive Whiskers is, I casually said that ponies of that type make good eating when they are fat. I didn't intend to hurt his feelings. I just figured that with grass as short as it was and dressed goat meat bringing 69 cents pound, Whiskers might want to feed his horse to the shearing crew.

Well, Young Whiskers didn't forget the incident. The first morning we hit his ranch, he left curt instructions for me to water down the pens while he and his hands were rounding up the sheep. The rest of the boys rode off to the pasture laughing and joking like drovers have done ever since man left the ground for four footed transportation.

Shearing corrals are mighty lonely early in the morning. For company, I had a tequila-burned sheep shearer and a short-tailed dog that'd weigh six or seven pounds. Whiskers' vengeful nature had taught me not to mention the dog's size to the sheep shearer. It was humiliating enough to be afoot without starting a fight with a sheep shearer. As low as I'd sunk, I couldn't stand another reduction in rank. You have to be awfully hardhearted to send a man to work with no horse to ride. Blue Beard wasn't so mean that'd he'd send a mate off without any company. I wasn't that lonesome the time I had to go to New York City.

While I was holding the water hose, I began to review my fate. Life shouldn't be so unkind as to send man to a deserted shearing pen to sprinkle the ground merely to keep dust out of the eyes of a bunch of high priced sheep shearers. Life ought to consists of rounding up fat sheep or sleek cattle. Herders don't deserve or expect much from their existence, but one of the famous beer advertisements blabs that you only go around once, and I know that going around once doesn't mean watering down shearing corrals. In fact, for my money, I'd bet that going around once didn't have the slightest thing to do with sheep or sheep shearing.

After two days on the ground, Young Whiskers' bay horse began to look classy. By the time I'd walked farther than I had previously in my whole life, that 800 pounds of mostly willow-tale began to look like an Arabian steed in the pictures of a story book. From the confinement of a walking job, a good saddle goat would have looked good. Never in my life had I felt more antagonistic toward people who walk for a hobby.

The next time the subject of Goat Whiskers' horse comes up, I'm going to keep my mouth shut. Hiking is for town people. Shortgrassers belong on wheels or saddle leather. Talking too much will get you in a lot of trouble. It'll be a many a day before I get in that kind of wreck again.